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SUBJECT: SCANDALS SHAKE THE MFA

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Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary and Comment. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been rocked recently by a diplomatic scandal and possible cover-up. The case involves the arrest of the husband of an officer assigned to the consulate in Los Angeles for heroin possession in January 2005. The information allegedly did not reach Minister Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic until October 2006, which has touched off an examination of who knew what and when. FM Kitarovic launched an investigation, completed on 19 December, and will review the case with PM Sanader and President Mesic. Already, the Minister announced she will recall the officer from the U.S. and commence disciplinary procedures for the officer's supervisors - former L.A. Consul Sanja Bujas-Juraga, currently MFA's Head of the Department for Arms Control and Disarmament and former State Secretary Gordan Bakota, currently Ambassador to Turkey. The affair, however, has dredged up other scandals in the MFA, another one also involving Bakota, leaving the public with an ugly picture of corruption and the impression of a minister not in control of her ministry. Dominating the press for the past several weeks, the controversy also leaves the door wide open for the opposition to attack the Sanader government in the 2007 parliamentary election run-up. Both the President and the PM have promised sanctions for those who participated in the cover-up, and are standing behind Kitarovic. End Summary and Comment.

L.A. Stories

¶2. (SBU) Several weeks ago, Croatian diplomat Marko Gaspar wrote an internal MFA memo about irregularities at the consulate in L.A., which somehow reached the press. Gaspar has since been withdrawn. He relayed the January 2005 arrest in Los Angeles of Bernard Barisic for possession of a small amount of heroin. Barisic is the husband of Croatian official Bozica Barisic, who is widely seen to be politically well-connected. After Barisic's arrest, Department's Office of Foreign Missions informed Consul General Juraga who then orally informed State Secretary Bakota about the incident, but not in writing. As a result of Barisic's connections, it is believed the incident was swept under the rug. Former FM Miomir Zuzul was in charge until February 2005. Information about the arrest did not reach Kitarovic until October 2006. She initiated an internal investigation. Disciplinary procedures will be launched against Bakota and Juraga, and the State Prosecutor is also investigating the entire affair for criminal conduct.

¶3. (SBU) The question swirling in the media is how Barisic

continued to work in the consulate for more than a year and a half after the arrest of her husband without the Minister's knowledge of the case. Press are speculating that Kitarovic lacks control over her ministry and that the ministry is weak and disorganized. Scandals seem to be further dogging the MFA following the January 2005 resignation of Zuzul under a cloud of suspicion. (Reftel) On 20 December, Sanader affirmed that Kitarovic's position is secure. "The Ministry is critical to EU and NATO accession, and I will not allow its destabilization," he stated. President Mesic also stood behind Kitarovic, noting that she had not been informed in order to properly react. He faulted the lack of an appropriate security pre-check and also Juraga's failure to create a paper trail of the incident.

When It Rains It Pours

¶4. (SBU) The L.A. affair has brought to light another scandal from 2004, in which former MFA driver Vladimir Topalovec accused the driver of the consul general in Munich of using diplomatic vehicles to traffic drugs. Topalovec had reported an incident to Bakota, but allegedly Bakota asked him to revoke that statement in writing, claiming that the person involved was Zuzul's "right hand man". No sanctions ensued and Topalovec was demoted to a job of driver-postman. Kitarovic was informed of the incident and State Prosecutors are still investigating. Also alleged in the press this week is the smuggling of large quantities of cocaine via diplomatic vehicles from the consulate in Bihac.

BRADTKE